

## **Editorial: Build country's future or watch it fall down**

July 25, 2008

The Hurricane Katrina disaster brought a national focus to what had previously been a quiet, mostly state and local discussion of the nation's infrastructure needs. The Interstate 35W bridge collapse put the spotlight on the country's roads and bridges, and the term "structurally deficient" became part of the lexicon.

But once transportation officials and bridge inspectors assured residents of dozens of major U.S. cities that the 35W failure was not systemic, the U.S. infrastructure debate became mostly background noise. Infrastructure isn't headline news for CNN or Fox -- except when it's falling apart -- and attention spans are short.

With too little fanfare earlier this year, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Govs. Edward Rendell of Pennsylvania and Arnold Schwarzenegger of California formed a nonprofit coalition, called Building America's Future, to advocate for infrastructure as a national priority. On Friday, a little more than a week before the anniversary of the 35W failure, Bloomberg and Rendell brought their bipartisan message to the Star Tribune's Editorial Board.

Skeptics might be inclined to dismiss the effort as an attempt by state and local officials to shift the burden for infrastructure investment to Washington. To their credit, Bloomberg and Rendell are upfront in saying the federal government should invest more in roads, bridges, rail, air traffic, sewers, dams, water treatment systems and other needs.

How much? Building America's Future doesn't provide a price tag, but it does cite a 2005 analysis by the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) that to bring existing infrastructure into decent repair would cost \$1.6 trillion over five years.

Some experts have dismissed the ASCE estimate as more of a wish list than a reality check, but even if \$1 trillion is a more realistic figure, who will pay for it, and how? New taxes -- including a higher federal gas tax, congestion pricing and other user taxes and fees -- will be necessary, Bloomberg and Rendell argue, but only if the American people can be shown that they're getting more than bridges to nowhere for their money. They advocate eliminating earmarks to increase discretionary federal spending on transportation.

They also back legislation that would create a National Infrastructure Bank to finance regional and national projects of at least \$75 million. And Rendell, who has proposed private ownership of the Pennsylvania Turnpike, said more public-private partnerships must be part of the national strategy.

Building America's Future is part think tank, part advocacy group, and we hope the thinkers will deliver even more innovative solutions in the months ahead and pressure the presidential candidates to respond.

We can continue to debate the extent of the country's infrastructure needs, but we've learned that lives are at risk when we delay addressing the issues. Bloomberg, Rendell and Schwarzenegger and the other public officials who have joined Building America's Future -- including Mayors R.T. Rybak of Minneapolis and Chris Coleman of St. Paul -- are fighting a worthy battle for the attention of the American people, the next president and the U.S. Congress.